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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the usefulness of case records in significantly expanding the base of knowledge in education administration. Forty-six school personnel case records were examined in regard to: how respondents perceive and describe problem situations; whether or not alternative strategies are reported and, if so, what types; and what kind of differences, if any, exist between successful and unsuccessful strategies. Although not a comprehensive or conclusive analysis, the study suggests that case records' most valuable contribution is the link they provide between theory and practice. Findings indicate that educators function primarily within a single theoretical model, at a conscious, cognitive level in which structural considerations are predominant. However, many cases show a contradiction between espoused theory and theory-in-use. If the central goal of effective administrative education is to work successfully with people in a "growth-enhancing" organization, the rational, controlling strategies of the prevalent institutional theory-in-use are an important issue, particularly because these cases document the negative impact that results when such strategies are employed. Secondly, the case records do provide information not readily accessible or apparent; they also illustrate theoretical concepts in behavioral and experiential terms. Finally, case records can define a new role for practitioners as creators, rather than consumers, of knowledge. Viewing practitioners as intentional actors in the development of knowledge, or "knowledge-in-action," helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice. (11 references) (LMI)

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Case Records: A Means to Enhance the Knowledge Base in Educational Administration?

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Case Records: A Means of Enhancing the Knowledge Base in Educational Administration?

When Paula Silver established the Center for Advancing Principalship Excellence (APEX) as a continuing education program for principals, she focused attention on the use of the case record. First and foremost, citing the common use of case records among doctors, lawyers, engineers, and architects, she defined the case record as a valuable professional development strategy. The preparation of case records, she claimed,"helps the professional analyze situations systematically; remember the details of each case; become aware of the outcomes of action and thus become somewhat experimental in practice; and distinguish between personal, emotional problems and professional, intellectual ones."

Aside from the advantages to the individual who prepares the case record, the case record is also viewed as an important source of information of value to practitioners as well as to the profession as a whole. Professor Silver noted that, in a profession in which the "voices" of practitioners are seldom heard describing or discussing problems of practice, the case record provides a means for them to contribute information to the knowledge base and is, therefore, a means of gaining new and valuable information about important aspects of administrative practice. Through its reflective approach and emphasis on these problems of practice, the case records generate a view of administration which is not typically explored in a "public" forum. The information generated by the case records not only expands our understanding of the reality of the administrative world but also provides a basis for the development of a research agenda which can more closely respond to organizational and administrative concerns.

This theoretical rationale makes a lot of sense. There's probably not a great deal of disagreement that we can learn more about administration by learning more about problems of

practice from the viewpoint of the practitioners as well as by examining the way in which practitioners respond to these problems of practice. But, at a more pragmatic level, do case records actually generate the type of information which expands our knowledge base in any significant ways? Do they, as Silver suggested, yield information which expands our knowledge of problems of practice? Do they provide guides to improve the effectiveness of administrative behavior? Do they help to uncover problems, questions, or issues appropriate for further research?

As an initial effort in responding to this question, a sample of case records submitted to the Silver Center was selected for an exploratory analysis.

The Case Record

The case record is a structured approach to reflection which, through a series of questions, encourages the respondent to systematically review the decision process initiated in response to a particular problem. These questions ask the respondent 1) to describe the problem, 2) to identify the intended outcomes or objectives, and 3) to outline the alternative strategies considered. With this overview of the planning phases of the decision process, the respondent is then asked 4) to describe what was done, 5) the result of those actions and finally 6) to assess the effectiveness of these actions in achieving the stated objectives: to identify critical events, decisions or situations which influenced the outcomes; and to identify other approaches which might have been more successful. Further reflections are also invited.

In sum, then, the case record provides information on each stage of the decision process: planning, decision, implementation and assessment. It enables us to examine cognitive and conceptual dimensions of the planning process as well as the more tangible aspects. It enables us to review not only behaviors but also intentions. Although the information presented is subjective and represents only one individual's perspective, one might argue that these

subjective aspects of decision making are essential to administration. (Osterman, in press).

Using the Case Record To Enhance knowledge

What might we learn about the decision process from examining these case records? The first three questions on the form yield information which expands our understanding of the cognitive and conceptual aspects of decision-making from the standpoint of administrators. The problem statement as well as the alternative strategies and intended outcomes convey important information about the predominant theories-in-use which shape behavior. This information can be assessed from the standpoint of individual cases or categories. Assuming that themes or patterns are identified, to the extent that the data base allows, these questions could be examined to determine if differences are related to variables such as age, sex, education, or locality. (I find this question particularly interesting within the context of the current debate regarding efficacy of professional development programs and the relevance of theory to practice.)

At a very basic level, the problem statements provide some insight into the types of problems which typically command the attention of educators and how they conceptualize and analyze these problems. Assuming that theories-in-use influence behavior(Argyris and Schon, 1974), one could look for differences in the way in which the respondents conceptualize the problem and try to determine if and how these differences relate to strategies and/or outcomes.

After reviewing the responses to these questions, we have some insight into the thought processes which led to the strategic decision. The next section of the case then provides us with a description of the actions which were actually taken. The action strategies could be examined separately or as one step in a total decision process. Consistent with Fiedler's findings (1974) as well as with Schon's explication of the distinctions between abstract thought and thought-in-action (1983, 1987), we might well expect to find differences between intention

and action. Finally, the case record provides a means of examining administrative responses to look for successful strategies; to test current theories : espoused or in-use; and to begin to develop guidelines for practice within the context of modified or new theories shaped by experience. What action strategies are described? Are any patterns discernible in these action strategies? Do successful strategies differ noticeably from those which are not successful?

Obviously, there are numerous ways in which the case records can be analyzed. This exploratory analysis focused on only a few of these questions not from any attempt to test a specific hypothesis but simply to see, in practice, whether or not case records might expand our knowledge as hypothesized.

The Sample

The sample includes 46 cases. The cases selected were those which had been completed in enough detail to be able to obtain a clear picture of the problem as well as the responses to the problem. Although it was Silver's intent to obtain case records from principals, many of the case records reviewed here were prepared by other school personnel: assistant principals, department chairpersons or other supervisory personnel, administrative interns, teachers and counselors.

In this sample, 12 were prepared by principals, 8 by assistant principals, 18 by other building level administrators, and 8 by teachers and/or guidance counselors. Of the 46 cases, 19 address problems at the high school level, 6 at the intermediate, and 20 at the elementary level.

Several questions were posed for this initial analysis:

1. What types of problems attracted the attention of the respondents?

2. Did respondents tend to describe those situations in which they were successfully able to achieve their objectives?

3. With respect to the alternatives considered to solve the problem in question, what considerations are apparent? Are alternative strategies reported, and if so, what types of strategies are reported?

4. Are there apparent differences between successful and unsuccessful strategies?

5. Do the case records provide useful information about administrative practice or generate a view of administration which is not typically explored in a "public" forum.

Findings

The findings with respect to each of these questions are as follows:

1. What types of problems were recorded?

Problems were classified in six categories: student behavior, curriculum and instruction, management and organization, supervision, personnel, and community relations.

Student Behavior includes cases in which the presenting problem is inappropriate student behavior. Cases in this category, for example, include incidents of vandalism, conflict between students on or off school property, and classroom disruption.

Curriculum & Instruction includes cases in which central issue is the quality of curriculum or instruction, for example, the need to develop an individualized program for a student with special needs.

Management and Organization refers to those cases dealing with policy, practice, and procedures. Cases in this category focus on problems such as unanticipated impact of a new student disciplinary policy, faculty dissatisfaction with a building repair schedule, and an honor student's failure to complete diploma requirements.

Supervision includes those cases which deal with quality of work performance on the part of a teacher or other staff member and range from problems with teacher burnout to problems with the building custodians.

Personnel refers to those problems which occur between or among staff members which are not necessarily related to the quality of work performance, for example, interpersonal conflict or health problems.

Community Relations cases are those in which problems predominantly involve individuals or groups outside of the school, for example, cases prompted by a student's arrest for rape, a custody conflict between divorced parents, and parental child abuse.

Among the 46 cases reviewed, the majority were classified as either student behavior (11) or management and organization (11). There were 9 cases dealing with supervision, and 5 each in the remaining categories, curriculum and instruction, personnel and community relations.

2. Did respondents tend to describe those situations in which they were successfully able to achieve their objectives?

Those cases which were not on-going were categorized cases as successful, unsuccessful, or mixed. Of the 43 cases which had been concluded, 25 were successful, 6 were unsuccessful, and 12 were classified by the respondents as only partially successful.

3. With respect to the alternatives considered to solve the problem in question, what considerations are apparent? Are alternative strategies reported, and if so, what types of strategies are reported?

Confronted with a particular problem, how did these educators respond? This analysis focused on only one aspect of the planning process: the identification of alternative strategies.

The individual's response to this question can be viewed as an indicator of conceptual complexity. Bolman and Deal (1986), Hart (in press), Pitner (1987), and Whyte(1967) among others, discuss the importance of conceptual complexity for the administrator and propose that the ability to envision multiple and diverse alternative strategies may increase flexibility

and effectiveness.

The individual responses to the question , "What alternatives did you consider to solve the problem?", were counted and categorized using Bolman and Deal's four frames (1986). Responses were classified as structural, human resource, political, or symbolic. Structural approaches would be those which attempt to resolve the problem by manipulating basic organizational components such as rules, regulations, policies, procedures, aspects of work design, or organizational processes such as decision-making or communication without regard for personal considerations. In a student behavior case which involved a student suspended for incidents of physical violence, for example, the strategy outlined and followed was exclusively structural and involved strict adherence to due process procedures. In another case, student misbehavior was dealt with by dividing groups, changing the schedule, and outlining punitive actions. In a supervision case, staff problems and anxieties were successfully relieved by changing class structure and modifying staff support arrangements.

While the structural frame is an impersonal approach which focuses on the organization and the job, the human resource frame focuses on the the employee as a person. Human resource strategies are those which emphasize the importance of identifying and responding to individual needs as a basis for resolving problems, for example, a meeting held to "understand the perspectives of others", the use of non-judgmental feedback and "listening" to respond to a "serious morale problem."

In some cases, what distinguished a structural response from a human resource strategy was the intent or context. For example, an administrator may recommend a meeting with involved parties. If the meeting is for the purpose of clarifying the rules and regulation as a means of gaining compliance, the strategy was classified as a structural response. If the purpose of the meeting was to enable the participants to participate in the decision process, to share

information, or to provide a forum for communication about the issues from different perspectives, the strategy was classified as a human resource strategy.

Political strategies were those which involved the use of power or pressure from individuals or groups, for example, a group of teachers who obtained the support of the union and the community to pressure for change, a district who used the threat of public exposure to force a teacher resignation, or a principal who used peer pressure to enforce a discipline policy.

Symbolic strategies were those in which the actions took on the characteristic of a ritual or drama. Examples of symbolic strategies might be an honors or award ceremony. Interestingly, there were only two strategies noted in the cases which could be construed as symbolic. In one situation, the principal held a meeting in order "to express outrage and disappointment at embarrassment to school, families, and district." (Case 3) In another, a teacher upset at being required to teach a course in an unacceptable way considered calling in sick. (Case 25)

With the exception of several cases where information was not included, respondents reported that they had considered multiple alternatives in the process of or prior to deciding how to proceed. Out of the 43 cases, (3 did not identify alternative), 152 alternatives were categorized. Of these, 108 (72%) were structural in contrast with 31 (20%) which reflected human resource considerations. Only 9 were political and only 2 could be construed as symbolic.

4. Are there apparent differences between successful and unsuccessful strategies?

What distinguished successful strategies from unsuccessful strategies? Do case records enable us to identify more effective strategies? Do successful strategies differ from unsuccessful strategies? From a rather cursory examination of the approaches outlined in these

cases, several hypotheses present themselves.

First, successful strategies respond to personal needs of organizational members. Using Argyris & Schon's distinction between Model I and Model II (1974), successful administrators use Model II approaches. They share control, they maximize the information available to all of the parties, they seek win/win solutions in which all participants experience psychological success. They utilize strategies which recognize the needs of others to exercise personal causation and seek concensus decisions. In resolving a dispute between two children, the assistant principal involved both in develop a plan and follow-up procedures and reported that "having the children feel like they were the decision-makers helped that plan to be successful." Similar strategies were reported in cases involving vandalism and substance abuse at school social events (Cases 1, 35), vandalism by a member of the wrestling team (Case 28), and persistent conflict between senior staff members in a high school department (Case 6).

Unsuccessful strategies, in contrast, tend to emphasize organizational control issues and neglect human resource issues. They attempt to achieve control and compliance using structural techniques; and, subordinating personal needs to organizational needs, they disregard opposing views, feelings, and needs of organizational members. One typical case focused on a department effort to improve special education testing procedures. Teachers devoted a great deal of time and effort, meeting with school personnel and representatives from publishing companies. As reported," the chairman started out with one opinion, let the committee meet, make decisions and do a lot of leg work. Then he made the (final) decision based on his own opinion." (Case 23) Case 11 is a similar situation where the principal had delegated the responsibility to resolve a problem and then failed to provide the support necessary to make the plan work. In case 14, a principal ignored concerns of the faculty about an attendance problem until they threated to go to the community and then, as did the principal in case 23, rejected the input of a teacher

committtee which had met regularly and developed his own plan. In another case, a supervision problem was viewed strictly in structural terms with no attention to human resource considerations. The replacement of the newly appointed and highly enthusiastic administrator was a structural success but a human resource failure. "The administrative tasks are now being performed satisfactorily. However, the teacher is now continually in very subtle and not too subtle ways attempting to undermine the new person and the program. The rest of the staff have partially isolated the teacher...The plan has partially worked. however, the human relations of this teacher still affects the operation of the program and the community's perception of the program. "

When feelings of people are ignored in favor of structural considerations, strategies fail. On the other side, however, structural solutions are often highly effective in resolving human resource problems. Case 22 describes the successful efforts of a principal to convince the central office to purchase a new copy machine. By keeping very systematic records, he clearly documented the inefficiency which had created consternation for the principal with teachers and parent groups. Case 30 describes how staff problems and anxieties were relieved by restructuring classes and support staff arrangements.

Secondly, a review of the case records illustrates the importance of communication in problem solving and supports Leavitt's findings (1951) that some communication patterns are more effective than others. Specifically, the cases illustrate the comparative advantage of the circle pattern of communication for decision-making over a linear or "chain" pattern. Successful strategies were characterized by an unrestricted flow of information among those involved. For example, in case 37, there was a need to develop a safe procedure to get all classes into the auditorium. The problem was presented at a faculty meeting and the new plan- acceptable to all- grew out of a brainstorming session which followed. "Involving the teachers in

the planning stages helped in getting their cooperation in making changes. Brainstorming resulted in not only a plan but a notification system informing the teachers that the event was ready to begin." Cases 38 and 39 describe the use of a group meeting to respond to a concern about a student's mental status and to a placement issue. "The team meeting was very effective" and the final decision was acceptable to all.

In unsuccessful cases, (Case 21, 9, 7, for example), communication patterns tended to look like the chain or the wheel with the flow of information being controlled by one person or being passed from person to person. Case 21 directly addressed these communication issues. A teen parent in a special program was observed "baiting and teasing her 1 yr. old". The teacher spoke to the parent and then spoke to the social worker. She relayed the problem to the social work intern who then called the teen parent from class to counsel her. The intern 's approach angered the student who then dropped out. As the respondent reflected: "The chief critical event was the haphazard lines of communication... None of us took the time to clearly define our concerns and course of action. Better communication among the three of us would have helped to agree on the course of action to be taken. People involved need to make sure that everyone is understanding what is being said. 'This is what I hear you saying, am I right?' and 'This is what I will do, what will you do?'"

At the same time, circle patterns do not always lead to success. In Case 15, the process paralleled that outlined in case 39. In response to a similar concern about a special ed placement, a group meeting was held, but, in contrast to the successful outcome reported in tthe previous case, this meeting led to decision which was never implemented. This exception, however, points to another important issue. In this case, there was no concensus on the problem. The parents were never able to get the staff to agree with their view of the problem, and the staff, who harbored an unspoken view that the parents were really the source of the problem,

simply ignored the process and made no changes in the child's instructional program.

Third, the case records suggest that multi-dimensional strategies appear to be more effective than uni-dimensional approaches; and that the identification and use of multiple strategies reflects a complex understanding of the problem. Successful cases are those in which strategies are tailored to the problem; but the choice of a successful strategy is strongly influenced by how the problem is defined. Many of the problems described in these cases, although apparently simply, are multi-dimensional and require multiple strategies. Consequently, problems successfully resolved are more likely to be problems analyzed in greater depth or, using Bolman and Deal's terminology (1986), through different frames or perspectives .

5. Do the case records, as suggested, generate a view of administration which is not typically explored in a "public" forum?

Given the confidential nature of the case record, respondents are able to discuss aspects of their practice which are not normally explored in a public forum. Case records, for example, describe the reaction of subordinates to administrative behaviors, the often far-reaching impact of administrative decisions and actions, as well as attitudes which affect the way people deal with problems.

Several cases, for example, describe how administrators created or aggravated problems by their failure to accurately anticipate the different perspectives or concerns of their associates. In Case 20 an attendance plan developed without input from teachers had created havoc. Subsequent involvement of teachers in the decision process produced a new plan which was satisfactory to all. In case 9, a principal's arbitrary reversal of a decision in response to political pressure created a morale problem among teachers.

Development of case records by persons in other roles enables administrators to obtain a perspective about the impact of administrative actions on other members of the staff, feedback which normally would not be presented to them. For example, cases dealing with discipline policy, (Case 7), high school diploma requirements (Case 9), special education procedures (Case 23), Phys Ed schedule (Case 11); and attendance problems (Case14) describe the way that administrative actions resulted in demoralization, alienation, and frustration among staff members and created antagonism and divisiveness between teachers and administrators. Case records offer a way to express this frustration and introduce this information in a risk-free way into the professional dialogue.

In Case 23 the negative experiences of the respondent led her to conclude that she would be "hesitant to become involved with any committee." The case records also point to a more generalized reluctance to approach supervisors with problems related to the organizational authority. In several of the cases, for example, respondents described feeling that superiors would not be open or responsive to their concerns: in one case, teacher dissatisfaction with an assignment (Case 25); in another, staff concerns about the health problems of a colleague (Case 17). In the cases dealing with the copy machine and the student suicide, both respondents also discussed feeling that their concerns would not be well-received. As the one administrator reported," I would have informed the business office much sooner if I had known they would be so receptive." The respondents in several of these cases describe how their experiences led them to change their views about what is acceptable and effective. The opportunity to explore these problems and to observe the success of non-traditional approaches provides support for other administrators to experiment in their own approaches.

Discussion

As indicated, this is by no means a comprehensive or conclusive analysis of even the small

number of case records included in this sample, but, it does illustrate ways in which case records can enhance the knowledge base in the field of educational administration.

For the profession as a whole, the case records provide information which can be used to illustrate, clarify, test, modify, and expand exisitng theoretical formulations; and to identify directions for future research. The predominance of structural and impersonal approaches to decision-making in these cases contrasted with relative effectiveness of strategies which recognize and address personal needs in a personal way raises interesting questions. A comment by Whyte is relevant here: "Most men carry in their heads an extremely limited repertoire of models. They could act with more understanding and effectiveness if they made their own models explicit and if they could become more flexible and inventive in developing and applying models to the problems they face" (cited in Crowson & MccPherson, 1987 p.59). The findings here suggest that educators function largely within a single model: at a conscious, cognitive, intellectual level, structural considerations dominate the decision process. When they outline possible strategies, their focus tends to be uni-dimensional and focused on the system often to the exclusion of the individuals within the system.

We know from Fiedler's (1974) research, however, that while individuals hold certain abstract views about leadership, their behavior in not always in conformity with those concepts in "real world" situations. Schon also leads us to anticipate that there may well be discrepancies between theory and practice (1974, 1983, 1987). A cursory examination of the case records to compare alternatives to action is consistent with this research and shows that in some cases, the administrators used a more complex range of strategies than those they outlined. In other cases, however, the action was more consistent with the alternatives which were described. (These discrepancies are particularly interesting here since the case record is a retrospective review of one's own decision process. One might assume that, in retrospect, the respondents

would incorporate their own action into the conceptual schema that is reported, but this does not seem to happen.)

The concept of reflective practice maintains that awareness of behavior, and particularly awareness of the contradictions between our espoused theory and our theory-in-use, is an essential precondition of behavioral change. Argyris and Schon(1974) described what they perceived to be a prevailing theory-in-use in our institutions and organizations. In this model, Model I, the actor seeks to define goals and try to achieve them; maximize winning and minimize losing; minimize generating or expressing negative feelings (or any feelings, one might add); and, above all, to be rational. These governing assumptions influence the action strategies which are called into play in specific ways. They encourage the individual to attempt to design and manage the environment - unilaterally; to own and control the task; to unilaterally protect oneself; and to unilaterally protect others from being hurt by witholding information, creating rules to censor information and behavior or by holding private meetings. By employing these strategies, the actor is seen as defensive, inconsistent, manipulative and unconcerned about others. These strategies lead to defensive relationships and dependence on the part of the subordinates; mistrust; conformity; and low freedom of choice, internal commitment, or risk-taking. In sum, the attempt to exercise or maintain control by choosing a highly rational process which basically excludes the other participant(s) as individuals also limits their ability to participate effectively in the decision process or to share in determining their own fate.

If the central core of effective educational administration is primarily the ability to work successfully with people and to create "growth enhancing organizations," a position espoused by Robert Owens, the predominance of Model I both as an espoused theory and as a theory-in-use among educators is an important issue, particularly because these cases document the negative impact which occurs when these strategies are employed and human resource considerations are

ignored or neglected.

Secondly, the case records do provide information about practice which may not be readily accessible or apparent. The case record provides a view of administrative behavior which incorporates intention as well as action, movitation as well as outcomes. The case record also provides information about strategies and outcomes from different perspectives, information which could be useful in enhancing administrative effectiveness. While the information which case records provide may not necessarily be "new" knowledge, it is knowledge in a new form. Rooted in experience, the case records contain information which comes directly from the world of practice and therefore is likely to have more legitimacy than that which is generated or developed in a more abstract fashion by non-practitioners.

The case records illustrate theoretical concepts in behavioral and experiential terms. in concretizing what could otherwise be viewed as a sterile, abstract, and meaningless theoretical perspective, the case record establishes preconditions for learning. If Argyris and Schon are correct, the outcomes of those cases which illustrate Model I and Model II theories-in-use should be noticeably different and clearly demonstrate the importance of these theoretical positions for practice. This realization, in turn, could be the stimulus which initiates the process of reflection and self-awareness and leads to modifications of theories-in-use, experimentation, and finally, new knowledge as evidenced in new modes of action.

Finally, the case records also strengthen the knowledge base by defining a new role for practitioners as creators of knowledge rather than consumers. By establishing the importance of and strengthening the foundations of "practical" knowledge, the case records emphasize the integral role of the practitioner in the development of the knowledge base. In so doing, they attract new knowledge and help to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Typically, we think of knowledge in terms of abstract concepts or ideas. Consistent with

our philosophical and scientific heritage, we have created artificial distinctions between theory and practice, idealizing the world of ideas and denigrating the world of practice . Schon (1983, 1987) has questioned the legitimacy of these distinctions and proposed an alternate perspective which once again integrates the worlds of theory and practice, idea and emotion, if you will, and focuses on "knowing-in-action". Within this framework, knowledge exists in the world of action as much as in the world of ideas. This reconceptualization enables practitioners and academicians to become partners in development of knowledge base and thereby eliminates the artificial distinctions which exist between the "researchers" and "practitioners", between "theory and practice." Within this conceptual framework, case records, which portray the administrator as an intentional actor and explore the interplay between thought and action, could indeed be an important and valuable source of knowledge.

Conclusion

To return to initial question: do case records actually generate the type of information which exhances the knowledge base in the field of educational administration? How one responds to this question depends to a certain extent on your perspective about what information is important, what issues are interesting, and what modes of inquiry are legitimate. Considering that this analysis of the case records was exploratory and somewhat cursory, from my perspective, they do provide information which increases our understanding of administrative practice and identifies areas for further inquiry.

Their most important contribution, however, may not be as a source of new information or ideas, but as a means to establish the linkage between theory and action. In the history of intellectual thought, there are few truly new ideas; but there are many valuable ideas and much information which have yet to reshape our traditional patterns of behavior. As an experiential illustration of theoretical concepts and principles, case records can facilitate the interplay

between ideas and action and thereby enhance the knowledge base in the field of educational administration by creating new knowledge-in-action.

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